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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of a study of a low-cost dropout prevention program in a rural, small city school district (approximately 3,500 students) that used school incentive teams and multicultural training to increase success for students at risk of dropping out of school. Selected teachers in the eight schools in the district were organized into school incentive teams. Teams of four to six teachers met with university faculty to formulate dropout prevention action plans. The initial dropout prevention plans focused on making the school environment more inviting to students and emphasized non-academic areas in which the school incentive teams could create opportunities for positive recognition of students. Evaluation of the programs was based on written dropout prevention plans, field notes of meetings held, school observations, and school attendance records. Ten teachers, counselors, and administrators participated in multicultural training aimed at identifying attitudes, perceptions, knowledge, and skills concerning cultural diversity. The results of the program show it to be effective in maintaining a high level of teacher interest and effort in improving school success for at-risk students. No improvement in student attendance was noted. Results of the multicultural training show a positive impact on the attitude of school personnel toward at-risk students who are culturally different. This paper contains 16 references. (KS)

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Introduction

The growing numbers of programs for high risk students across the country reflect the severity of the dropout problem. The Education Commission of the States (Isenhart & Bechard, 1987) identified 190 programs directly related to dropout prevention in 46 states; the vast majority begun since 1983. President Bush's goal to raise the national high school graduation rate to 90% by the year 2000 should promote additional dropout prevention efforts.

Many dropout prevention programs have focused on students' behaviors and attitudes as the core problem. More recently, the dropout prevention literature (Gutherie, Long, & Gutherie, 1989; O'Sullivan & Tennant, 1989; Slavin, Karweit, & Madden, 1989) has suggested that effective programs should focus on schools organizing to meet the needs of high-risk students. The Accelerated Schools approach (Levin, 1987) uses a school based steering committee, comprised of the school principal, teachers, other staff, and parents to coordinate the reorganization of the school; the goal of the

program is to have all students at or above grade level by sixth grade. The Comer (1980) model advocates restructuring the school to meet the needs of at-risk students through administrator, teacher, student, parent, and community collaboration. The Success for All program (Madden, Slavin, Karweit, 1989) employs school teams to review student weekly progress, reorganizing the instructional program so that students who have fallen behind are provided additional help. These strategies provide consistent, collaborative, and comprehensive services that involve parents, change teachers' attitudes, and encourage community support.

School districts desirous of addressing dropout prevention must choose among available programmatic options. Measuring the effectiveness of a particular dropout prevention strategy is problemmatic when elementary schools are included. Evaluation of dropout prevention efforts with students in the elementary grades requires alternative success indicators in lieu of waiting for an effect on graduation rates. Students' enhanced achievement, attendance, or motivation to stay in school often provide indicators of dropout prevention success. Byrk and Thum (1989) found that early absenteeism among high school students was the strongest student characteristic predictive of dropping out. O'Sullivan (1989) found absences, teacher referrals, and age as consistently strong predictors of the number of failing grades received during a semester by 262 sixth-grade middle school students .

Teachers' attitudes and orientation have been identified as a factor in at-riskness or disconnectedness (e.g. Beyer and Smey-Richman's 1988 study of teachers' attitudes toward at-risk students in a nonurban school and Strahan's 1987 studies of teacher attitudes and instruction). In addition, demographic research (Hodgkinson, 1985) has raised the issue of the rapidly increasing

diversity of the student population and the simultaneous decreasing multiculturalism of the teaching pool. Mungo (1989) points out that unless measures are taken, we are heading for a cultural confrontation in the classroom; which can only exacerbate the dropout problem. In looking at the impact of multicultural training on the attitudes of teachers and other school personnel toward at-risk students who are culturally different, Baber (1991) concluded that training in multicultural knowledge, skill, and attitude competencies has to be a critical component in any at-risk programs involving students who are culturallly different.

While the need for effective dropout prevention grows, the availability of resources to fund these efforts is scarce. Even though Levin (1989) has very effectively argued that investments in dropout prevention are undeniably cost-effective, many school districts face serious budget cuts that leave little money available for dropout prevention. The purpose of this study is to present the results of a low-cost dropout prevention program in a small city school district that used school incentive teams and multicultural training to increase success for students at risk of dropping out of school.

Method

In the spring of 1989 a small city school district received a modest grant ($10,000) from state dropout prevention funds. The school district served approximately 3,500 students who attended classes in a high school (grades 10-12), a junior high school (grades 8-9), a middle school (grades 6-7), one of four elementary schools (grades 1-5), or a kindergarten school, employing 160 classroom teachers. Students in the schools were almost evenly divided between African-Americans and Caucasians. The school district had the eighth highest dropout rate in the state among 139 school districts. The

purpose of the grant was to develop strategies to address the needs of at-risk students in the schools. Half of the grant-funds were spent to purchase a dropout prevention interactive video program and equipment to use with middle, junior high, and high school students. The remainder of the funds were to be used to develop dropout prevention programs in each of the eight schools.

Selected teachers were organized into school incentive teams for each of the eight schools in the district for the purpose of discussing dropout prevention possibilities. Teams of four to six teachers met with university faculty four times during the spring 1989 semester to formulate dropout prevention action plans. A three-day summer workshop was held in 1989 to move the action plans closer to implementation. During the workshop four university faculty and an assistant principal from another school district worked with the school incentive teams in large and small groups. Multicultural training was one of the foci of the workshop along with presentation of strategies that had worked in other places, and how to evaluate programs for at-risk students. The product of the workshop was a written plan for each school to present to their colleagues at the beginning of the 1989-90 school year.

Four follow-up meetings were planned during the 1989-90 academic year for the purpose of strengthening the evaluation component of the program plans. These meetings also would allow the school incentive teams to report on their activities, progress, and frustrations. Additional multicultural training for middle, junior high, and high school teachers, counselors, and administrators was planned as another result of the summer workshop activity. This training was made possible by a small ($ 2,060) grant

from the Research Council of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, as well as staff development resources from the school district.

School Incentive Teams Component

Thirty-eight teachers from the eight schools in the school district participated in the school incentive teams. School administrators (principals and assistant principals) were present for some meetings and, although consulted, were only loosely associated with the school incentive teams. Participation in the program was voluntary although some teachers volunteered reluctantly in response to their principals' request. Two -hour meetings of the School Incentive Teams were held after school in September, November, February, and May of the 1989-90 academic year. Individual school teams met as they thought appropriate. Teachers received three hours of credit toward teaching certification renewal as a result of their participation in the school incentive teams.

School incentive teams were encouraged to implement their action plans beginning with the opening of the 1989-90 academic year. Teams were told that funds were very limited, but that the dropout prevention coordinator would be working to solicit donations from community organizations and businesses that could be used as prizes for students. The dropout prevention office could also provide clerical assistance to produce certificates of recognition. Teams were told that they had full autonomy over how, when, and with whom they intervened. Seven of the eight teams decided to implement their plans with the assistance of the general school faculty. The high school team decided that they would first try to implement

their action plan themselves; sharing the results of their efforts with the general faculty later in the school year.

The initial dropout prevention plans focused on making the school environment more inviting to students and emphasized non-academic areas where the school incentive teams could create opportunities for positive recognition of the students. Invitational approaches, for example, included the creation of a birthday bulletin board where names or pictures of students with their birthdays were posted monthly; and adding a school song, identifying a school color, and printing school t-shirts when none existed previously. Positive recognition of students was best exemplified by the VIP awards program where the local radio station agreed to announce, on selected mornings before school, the names of students who were recognized by their teachers. The program began in just one elementary school and quickly spread to all the others. VIP students usually received a VIP button and a prize when they arrived at school.

The school incentive teams at the middle, junior, and senior high schools included activities more directly aimed at dropout prevention. Recognizing the need to personalize the connection between the students and the school, all three school incentive teams included a component that paired high-risk students with an adult. At the junior and senior high school these adults were teachers who made concerted efforts to take a special interest in their assigned student. At the middle school volunteers were recruited from the local bank who were trained to actively listen to the high-risk students. Students were then paired with listeners who met with students once a week for half an hour. The bank was very supportive of the program and allowed employees released time to meet with the high risk students.

Many of the incentive ideas resulted in activities to improve attendance. Monthly attendance awards were initiated for individuals, classrooms, and grades. Names of students with perfect attendance for the month were posted on attendance bulletin boards, perfect attendance buttons distributed, and/or improved attendance recognized with a party in the cafeteria. At the middle school, during one of the afternoon periods, students were randomly selected to "come on down to the office" and select a prize if they were in attendance. At the junior high school, every two weeks teachers nominated students who had attended school for that 10-day period and who were considered by the teacher to be a "super star;" these students' names were announced, placed on a centrally located bulletin board in the school, and they were invited to a recognition breakfast toward the end of the school year.

The school incentive teams discussed evaluation of the components during the November meeting. After a presentation and discussion about program evaluation by one of the university faculty consultants, members of the teams decided that they were better prepared to implement programs than assess their results; team members' interests aligned similarly. There was no provision for an independent evaluator to determine program impact, so the group decided that written dropout prevention plans, field notes of meetings held, school observations, and school attendance records would be the main data sources used for the evaluation of the dropout prevention efforts.

Multicultural Training Component

Ten teachers, counselors, and administrators from the middle, junior high, and high school participated in six hours of multicultural training in spring 1990; another four hours of training was completed in fall 1990.

Teachers received continuing education credits that counted toward the state's teaching certification renewal.

During the first training session, participants completed a questionnaire which collected background information and measured their attitudes about diversity, their perceptions of multicultural education, and their feelings about culturally different, at-risk students. Participants then engaged in a series of small and whole group intercultural learning excercises aimed at getting them to recognize and articulate their attitudes, perceptions, knowledge, and skills concerning cultural diversity. An in-depth dialogue concerning the definitions, assumptions, and rationales of multicultural education was also a part of the first session.

Participants completed a series of processing assignments during the interim between training sessions. These assignments included: conducting a multicultural survey of their community or school; beginning a multicultural education resource file (articles, pictures, media items, etc); keeping a journal in which they recorded reactions to cultural encounters; developing a booklet of community resources for teaching about a local group; and interviewing their colleagues about their perceptions of multicultural education.

The second training session began with a discussion of their assignments and a review of the definitions and assumptions of multicultural education. Participants then completed a cultural learning continuum assignment designed to help them become more aware of the multicultural learning process and how they had moved along it. They chose 3 ethnic-cultural groups and placed themselves on the learning continuum (ethnocentrism, awareness, understanding, acceptance/respect, appreciation/valuing, selection, adoption, assimilation,

adaptation/acculturation, biculturalism, multiculturalism) according to where they felt they were in relationship to each group. After a discussion of their responses to the continuum, participants were presented with the Baber-Goodenough Model of Culture (Baber,1990) which focuses on the content and sources of individual and collective cultures. A situational excercises in cross-cultural awareness was also included in this session; participants were asked to discuss how and why they would respond to 10 critical incidents in cultural understanding.

At the end of the second session, participants were asked to complete a reassessment of their feelings about culturally different, at-risk students as well as an evaluation of the training sessions.

Results

School Incentive Team Component

Evaluation of the school incentive team component was intended to be directed by the team members. The university faculty member designated as the evaluation consultant was available for technical assistance in planning and conducting the evaluation but was not directly responsible for evaluating the school incentive team program. Since written dropout prevention plans, field notes of meetings held, school observations, and school attendance records were the main data sources used for the evaluation more can be said about the school incentive teams' process rather than products.

School incentive teams were an unmitigated success as a vehicle to involve teachers in positively altering school environments. From birthday buttons to end-of -year recognition banquets, the school incentive teams implemented more than 70 activities in all eight schools over the 1989-91 academic year. Given that these activities were done by teachers who were

essentially volunteering, the accomplishments are even more impressive. At the final meeting for the academic year in early May, school incentive team members not only reported on past accomplishment but listed a variety of new activities with which they intended to end the school year. The enthusiasm conveyed by these teachers was remarkable as they told of their continuing efforts to make school a more inviting place for students. At a time in the school year when many teachers are tired and anxiously waiting for the end, for school to be over, the teachers in the school incentive teams were planning field trips and visits from guest speakers.

Changes in the attendance rates were not as clearly observeable as the degree of the teachers' enthusiasm. As can be seen in Table 1 attendance rates at the elementary schools for the two years preceding the school incentive team program,when compared to the school incentive team program year (1989-90), stayed primarily the same; for the most part in the 90% range. At the middle school, junior high, and senior high schools attendance dips down into the upper 80 percent for the last four months of the school year, but still no effect on attendance rates is apparent.

An informal focus group evaluation of the school incentive team program was conducted with participating teachers and the dropout prevention coordinator at the final meeting in May. Teachers said that they were very pleased with the program, that it was a lot of work but well worth the effort. Their recommendations for the next year were that they needed more planning time, more and different incentives for the students, and some released time to implement the programs they planned. The teachers saw the four meetings during the school year as substantively promoting their participation in the program. The sharing of activities planned and

Table 1

Percentage Attendance 1987-88, 1988-89, and 1989-90 by Schools Participating in the School Incentive Team Program

Schools		Month of Operation							
		1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th
Elem. 1	1987-88	97.0	95.9	95.7	95.0	93.0	92.0	96.7	94.9
	1988-89	95.3	95.4	93.9	92.2	92.3	86.8	92.1	92.9
	1989-90	96.3	94.0	94.3	90.6	91.4	92.9	93.4	93.0
Elem. 2	1987-88	98.0	95.1	94.9	95.5	93.2	93.4	95.3	94.1
	1988-89	98.5	96.0	95.0	95.3	90.8	89.1	92.9	95.6
	1989-90	98.0	96.0	96.4	94.4	95.1	95.0	95.9	95.8
Elem. 3	1987-88	97.2	95.5	95.6	95.4	92.9	91.4	95.9	94.7
	1988-89	97.5	96.0	95.6	94.6	93.5	89.0	94.6	93.2
	1989-90	97.5	96.1	94.6	94.2	93.6	94.7	96.3	95.3
Elem. 4	1987-88	97.3	95.9	95.3	94.8	92.7	91.2	95.3	94.1
	1988-89	97.0	95.4	95.5	94.4	92.8	—	95.7	93.4
	1989-90	97.3	95.9	95.6	89.6	94.0	95.1	95.4	96.1
Elem. 5	1987-88	97.0	94.0	96.1	93.5	90.9	90.6	94.9	93.3
	1988-89	96.0	94.4	94.1	91.9	92.5	84.6	93.4	93.7
	1989-90	97.1	94.8	91.7	90.6	89.4	92.4	92.2	91.7
Middle School (grs. 6-7)	1987-88	96.3	94.4	93.4	91.0	86.8	91.9	92.9	91.7
	1988-89	94.4	92.8	94.5	90.6	89.6	86.2	92.5	90.5
	1989-90	93.9	93.4	91.7	90.6	89.4	92.4	92.2	91.7
Jr. High School (grs. 8-9)	1987-88	95.6	93.2	92.2	90.9	90.3	89.2	91.8	90.5
	1988-89	93.2	92.5	90.6	90.0	89.4	87.1	89.7	89.6
	1989-90	93.8	92.1	91.8	90.9	89.7	90.4	91.7	90.3
High School (grs. 10-12)	1987-88	95.5	93.1	92.6	91.2	92.5	91.7	91.6	89.2
	1988-89	93.9	91.9	90.9	91.3	90.5	88.9	89.8	89.5
	1989-90	91.9	90.3	89.7	90.0	88.1	88.4	89.9	88.1

implemented in each of the school stimulated adoption of similar activities by the other school incentive teams. Scheduled meetings throughout the school year helped the school incentive teams structure their activities, since they knew that they would be asked to report on their progress.

Multicultural Training Component

Written and oral feedback from participants and the training facilitator's analysis of discussions, exercises, and the pre and post training questionnaires were the data sources used for the evaluation of the multicultural training sessions. The goal of the training was to determine the nature and extent of the impact of multicultural training on the attitudes of teachers and other school personnel toward at-risk students who are culturally different.

The multicultural training had a definite impact on all of the participants. The nature and extent of the impact varied by the amount of previous intercultural experiences and the cultural background of the participant (there were gender, religious, and ethnic differences in the group of participants).

Some participants indicated that they had come into the training thinking that they were competent in multicultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes; but learned that while they may have been somwhat competent on a bicultural level, they had a long ways to go multiculturally. Others realized that even though they had developed "over time a genuine appreciation for some cultures, " they still had some work to do in order to "gain knowledge of and feel comfortable with" many other cultures. Although participants self-selected into the training (which might indicate a certain level of interest), some said in the end that they were not only surprised that they

"were so interested in this area" but they were also surprised at "how it can influence" their teaching. Participants were pleased that the training had given "more insight that can be directly applied to our sitation." Some participants also indicated that the sessions helped them to better understand the content of their individual cultures, in addition to increasing their awareness of the content of other cultures.

Overall the group agreed that the sessions had changed how they felt about culturally different at-risk students, their perceptions of the reasons for lack of achievement among these students, and their approach to interacting with these students. For example when asked initially (pre-training) how they felt about culturally different at-risk students, participants used the descriptors: "nervous," "anxious," "frustrated," "inadequate," "superior," "defensive," "angry," "uncomfortable," and "incompetent." Post-training descriptors were: "comfortable," " concerned with perceptions," "cautious," "confident," "concerned," "competent in dealing with individual differences," "empathetic," "sensitive," "knowledgeable," and "interested" (see Table 2 for a complete list of pre and post-training descriptors). When asked about the causes for low achievement among culturally different, at-risk students, participants initially (pre-training) listed: "apathy," "low self-esteem," " lack of goal setting," "lack of motivation," "no positive role models," "language barriers," "inappropriate teaching methods," and "different expectations." Post-training reasons were: "teaching methods," "stereotyping," "differing values," "attendance," "low teacher expectations," "cultural misunderstanding between home and school," "tracking," diverse learning styles," "lack of sensitivity," and"language barriers" (see Table 3 for a complete list of pre and post-training reasons).

Table 2

Multicultural Training Participants' Feelings About Culturally Different At-Risk Students

Pre-training	Post-Training
excited	sensitive
interested	interested
curious	empathetic
loving	honored
proud of small successes	competent in dealing with differences
need to provide positive feedback	knowledgeable
usually at-ease	comfortable
energized	concerned with their perceptions
needed	cautious
hopeful	persistent
willing to learn	confident
	helpful
	needed
	wanted
	ignorant of some needs
	determined
	joyful when progress is made
overwhelmed	uncomfortable
drained	tenative in some areas
challenged	inadequate
frustrated	depressed at lack of progress sometimes
in need of information	
inadequate	
sympathy for home situations	
superior	
awkward	
concerned that they understand me	
defensive	
stressed	
angry	
pressure	
nervous	
anxious	
like an entertainer	
uncomfortable	
incompetent	

Table 3

Multicultural Training Participants' Perceptions of Reasons for Low Achievement Among Culturally Different At-Risk Students

Pre-Training	Post-Training
placement in low level classes	low teacher expectations
frustration	tracking
an assimilative school environment	differing values
lack of teacher understanding	cultural misunderstanding between home and school
culture gap	low teacher expectations
low teacher expectations	diverse learning styles
lack of relevance	lack of sensitivity
falling through cracks	language barriers
nonacceptance	teaching methods
society	stereotyping
nutrition	attendance
inappropriate teaching strategies	
scheduling	
language barriers	
hidden agendas	
racism	
stereotypes	
fear of the majority (whites)	little opportunity for family support
student apathy	parental assistance
school/education is not a priority	apathy
frustration	low self-esteem
lack of home support	
low self-esteem	
lack of goals	
disinterest	
poor modeling at home	
lack of mainstream motivation	
parent apathy	
rebellion	
lack of interest	
drugs	
crisis-oriented families	
parents' low level of education	

The group unanimously agreed that everyone working with at-risk and/or culturally different students ought to be required to participate in multicultural training. In fact, the middle and high schools are making multicultural training a component of their drop-out prevention programming.

Conclusions

School Incentive Team Component

The results of the program show it to be unusually effective in maintaining a high level of teacher interest and effort in improving school success for at-risk students. All the teachers in the district became aware of school incentive team efforts; most participated in the activities. Teachers' attendance at the meetings throughout the year was very high and new initiatives were scheduled throughout the school year including the last month of the school year. Attendance data for each of the schools was compared but no improvement was noted; most probably due to the already high attendance rates.

Certainly the dropout prevention strategy used was low in cost (less than $40 per teacher). Preliminary analysis supports the school incentive teams as a method for involving large proportions of teachers in finding ways for high-risk students to experience success. Further exploration of this cost-effective dropout prevention path appears warranted at a time when school districts are unable to muster the funds to support sizeable dropout prevention projects.

Multicultural Training Component

The results of the training show it to have a positive impact on the attitude of school personnel toward at-risk students who are culturally different. The feedback from participants during the training also showed that this is an area of concern for those working with culturally different students. Teachers, counselors, and administrators recognize that they are deficient in multicultural knowledge, skill, and attitude competencies; and they are anxious to remedy these deficiencies. As previously noted, the middle and high schools are planning to infuse multicultural training for school personnel, parents, and community supporters in their drop-out prevention programming. For example, the high school has received a basic skills training grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The grant will be used to develop and implement A.C.H.I.E.V.E. (Academic Coaching Helps Individuals Exerience a Vital Education) in Basic Skills, a special summer program for 30 in-coming 9th graders who have been designated as high-risk students. The project's co-director, Dr. C.R. Baber, was the facilitator of the multicultural training described in this paper and is working with the high school to develop multicultural training activities for the program staff, parents, students, and community mentors.

Although multicultural training used as a dropout strategy in this 1990 case was somewhat expensive ($206/participant), this was a pilot project and therefore participation was limited. The expenses also included $500 to purchase multicultural materials for classroom and the school media centers. A two-day multicultural training workshop for 25 participants would normally cost $1500, making it very cost-effective at $60 per participant

As with the school incentive teams, preliminary analysis supports multicultural training as a means of providing significant numbers of

teachers and other school personnel with strategies to increase school success for high-risk students who are culturally different. Further exploration of this cost-effective dropout prevention component appears warranted at a time when school districts are facing potentially explosive changing cultural demographics in the classroom and at the same time are unable to accrue the funds to support sizeable dropout prevention projects.

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